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ABSTRACT

The Chancellor of the New York City Board of Education was required to set minimum standards of performance and establish the accountability plan for all schools in the city's decentralized school system. The system includes 32 community school districts. A 29-member commission, which held periodic one-day meetings, developed the standards for the accountability program's criteria that had been developed by the Chancellor. After the full commission set the goals and tasks, various staff working groups were formed to perform the data analyses and concept development for presentation to the full commission. City-wide means and distribution of achievement, the percentage of schools that would pass or fail particular standards, the improvement needed by the lowest performing schools, and the proposed standards' capacities to prepare students for graduation were analyzed. Schools are to be assessed annually, but are given three years to halve their deficits vis-a-vis each performance standard. The commission's final report ("Foundations for Academic Excellence") included recommendations on both minimum and progress standards as well as means of applying the universal standards. (TJH)

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NEW YORK CITY'S SCHOOL PERFORMANCE INDICATORS:

A COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

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THE NEED

In New York City, nearly one million children attend approximately one thousand schools. There is a decentralized school system which places operational responsibility for elementary and intermediate/junior high schools with thirty-two Community School Districts. The Chancellor of Schools is responsible for citywide operations such as budget, personnel, curriculum development, and payroll functions. The Chancellor also has direct operating responsibility for the city's one hundred twenty high schools and for Citywide Special Education programs.

The mission of the Board of Education is "to educate all students to their fullest potential so that they acquire the skills, knowledge, attitudes, values, and sense of self necessary to contribute productively to society and to continue learning throughout their lives." In large measure, ensuring accountability for the education of New York City's children rests with the Chancellor's legal authority to set minimum standards of performance for all schools in the City.

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THE PLAN

The Chancellor developed an accountability plan for ensuring the effectiveness of New York City public schools through the evaluation of all schools versus performance standards and evaluation of schools' progress versus their past performance. Results were to be measured in terms of progress toward meeting standards. Schools had to achieve clearly-defined school improvement objectives.

Schools would be assessed annually, but would be given three years to halve their deficits vis-a-vis each performance standard. In cases where a particular standard had been met, the school would be required to set objectives for further improvement. A process of "Comprehensive School Improvement" was prescribed to affect the needed changes within the school.

THE CRITERIA

But the bedrock of this plan was the identification of clearly defined, measurable, challenging, yet realistic performance standards. The Chancellor had identified the criteria to be used in order to provide a comprehensive assessment: reading and mathematics test scores for every grade, attendance rates, dropout rates, graduation rates, and other measures. However minimum standards of performance in each criterion had to be identified. These could not be set unilaterally.

These standards had to have credibility with the Board of Education, school-based professionals, the unions, a large number of educational advocates groups across the City, testing and evaluation experts, and with the public at large. Since setting standards is by no means an exact science, a process of consensus-building was essential to setting those crucial definitions of performance. In fact, although Chancellors since 1969 had the authority to set minimum performance standards, none had done so. How could a Chancellor set uniform standards across such a large and diverse school system? How could one set of standards appropriately address the performance of students who speak sixty different languages, change schools frequently, are disproportionately poor, and have special educational needs? It was going to be the process by which the standards were set which would determine their ultimate credibility for use in holding schools accountable for their performance and improvement.

THE PROCESS

The Chancellor chartered an independent Commission, composed of representatives from the spectrum of constituencies which would ultimately have to support and implement the standards. It was key that this Commission, while advisory to the Chancellor, should also be independent. Therefore, it was important that the Chairperson be a distinguished and respected educator who was from outside the school system. The Chancellor identified Dr. Edmund Gordon from Yale University to chair the Commission. Dr. Gordon, with his

expertise in education as well as his facilitating communications style was an excellent choice for the position. Dr. Gordon employed a small staff of consultants who served as analysts and writers.

Still, it was important that the Commission have access to the data resources of the Board and to the Board's subject-matter experts in testing, evaluation, and school improvement. It was also important that the end results of the Commission's work be suitable for implementation in the context of the New York City public school system. For these reasons, the Chancellor assigned his Executive Assistant to work with Dr. Gordon as Staff Director.

The Chancellor and Dr. Gordon identified potential participant organizations - a list designed to include representatives from Superintendents, advocates groups, higher education, testing and evaluation experts nationwide, the unions (supervisors, administrators, and teachers), and the business community. Each of the invited organizations designated high-level representatives to be members of the Commission.

The entire twenty-nine member Commission held full day meetings periodically. At first these meetings were used to set the goals and the parameters of the work. Later they were used to define the tasks, and later still, to review, amend, and approve the recommendations of the "working groups" which had performed the tasks requested by the Commission as a means to achieve its objectives within the ambitious deadline.

The Commission had only five months to agree on standards for each criterion the Chancellor had set, and to react to the Chancellor's Plan - the manner in which the standards would be used to evaluate schools. Only this timeline would enable the Chancellor's Plan to be implemented for the next school year. Therefore, although the Commission's initial discussions were conceptual, it wasn't long before a process had to be determined to get the specific tasks accomplished. There was a huge amount of "staff" work to be done. Before standards could be set, much information had to be gathered and analyzed: longitudinal and annual test results across the grades, attendance rates, dropout rates, graduation rates, and so forth. These data had to be analyzed for the system, and for each school in relation to the others.

The process by which the staff work was accomplished had to be open and participatory. Therefore, after the full Commission set the goals and tasks, various staff working groups were formed to perform the data analyses and concept development to be brought back to the full Commission for the next month's meeting. Staff working sessions were full day marathons. They were held on a pre-arranged schedule which was distributed in advance to all Commission members. Any member of the Commission who wanted to participate in any working session was welcome to do so. Many did. In fact, the Chairperson made an effort to have as wide a participation as possible.

It was especially important to have people at these sessions who had strong opinions about the issues being addressed. It was also important that skeptical members work with the group in order to avoid dissention later on. Including the "unconverted" is an essential element of any planning process. In that way dissenting members might be persuaded, compromises might be reached, or the "unconverted" might persuade everyone else. In any event, this is the only way everyone feels ownership of the results.

The Commission asked the working groups to propose various conceptual options for setting the standards, and to document the actual standards which would result from each method. The working groups consisted of Commission staff, Board of Education data processing, testing and evaluation staff, "field" practitioners (superintendents and principals), as well as national testing experts. All other Commission members were welcome to attend as well.

The working groups explored various methodologies regarding standard-setting. They looked at ranked listings of all schools in all criteria. They examined systemwide results. They explored national models. The working groups debated the merits of one test versus others, and produced opinions about the viability of each of the criteria.

The working groups also explored concepts. For example, the group which worked on setting the elementary school reading standards brainstormed a new concept: progress standards. Standards in grades three and six could be

set using pre-established "state reference points." Since no such benchmarks were available in the other grades, how would standards be set? The working group proposed that these be expressed as metrics which would indicate progress toward achieving the standards in grade three and six.

There was true "give and take" between the full Commission and the working groups. The Commission asked that steps be taken to ensure that schools would not achieve the required improvement "on the margin." That is to say, schools should not be allowed to improve their results merely by applying more resources to children who just fell below the cut-off. Genuine school improvement had to be made by raising the performance of all children. In response to that request, the working group refined the notion of "progress" standards. "Progress standards" were now to be defined as a specified, quantitative improvement to be made by the children in the bottom quartile of the school.

This "give and take" continued. The options defined by the working groups were presented to the full Commission. Commission members debated their merits at large group meetings. Dr. Gordon was expert in summarizing the discussion, adding his own wisdom, and articulating a consensus.

Five analyses were done in the decision model for setting standards:

1. Analysis of citywide means and distribution of achievement.

2. Analysis of the percentage of schools that would pass and fail standards at particular probe points on either side of citywide medians.

3. Analysis of the amount of improvement that would be required of the lowest performing schools under Chancellor's fifty percent deficit reduction mechanism.

4. Comparison between the amount of improvement required of low performing schools and improvements demonstrated which had previously been by CSIP schools.

5. Analysis of proposed standard's capacity to prepare students for graduation.

In many cases the Commission settled on standards which represented the citywide median, however some standards were deliberately set higher. For example, the Commission decided to raise the standard in grade six reading and mathematics since schools would have had more time with these children. Attendance rates in junior high schools and high schools were set to be very high. High school dropout rates were set at a level at which two thirds of the schools fell below. These were philosophical decisions which were made, in the context of the data, to drive school improvement.

The Commission accepted the recommendations of the working groups that certain of the Chancellor's criteria were not appropriate to use for standard setting at this time. These included writing tests and incidents, both of which were too "soft" and open to a myriad of interpretations.

In addition to its work on setting standards, the Commission held long discussions about the underlying philosophy and concepts of the Minimum Standards Plan. The entire Commission grappled with the conceptual cornerstones of the plan. The Commission saw its role as being a catalyst for improving schools in New York City. This would be only the first report. Subsequent reports would deal fully with the Commission's notions of effective schooling for New York City.

An underlying concept which produced lengthy discussion and debate was whether the Chancellor's notion of "universal" standards was appropriate. There were two opposing arguments; both of which seemed valid. On one hand, identifying a single standard for all schools and all children would set uniform expectations and would reinforce the notion that all schools and students were to improve and achieve. "Contextual" variables such as mobility, limited English proficiency, or students' socioeconomic status were not to be used as excuses for lower expections or poorer education.

On the other hand, those "contextual" factors were real and had to be factored in by some means. Could you really expect the same performance from schools which had more priviledged students or circumstances than you could from schools which had serious outside factors with which to contend?

The Commission's debate was passionate. Ultimately it was decided that the concept of universal standards was absolutely essential to improving

education in New York City. The Commission endorsed the concept which the Chancellor had proposed; that each school had to cut its deficits in half within three years. This seemed a fair way to implement universal standards. Schools were to be judged against the progress they made. The standards determined the required improvement objectives, but the school was judged against its own past performance. It was also agreed that where schools had already achieved a given standard they would be asked to set a higher goal.

Three years was judged to be a fair amount of time to gauge improvement. All schools would be assessed annually to determine their progress. Individual School Profiles were developed for this purpose as well as for school improvement planning. These documents provided data and data analysis in each standard criterion over a three year period. Contextual data were also provided in the School Profiles for the purpose of school improvement planning.

Other aspects of this problem were not resolved as easily. Although standards were to be universal and schools' targets differentially set, provisions had to be made to ensure special attention for students who needed it. Without undermining the concept of "universal" standards, it was agreed that special provisions had to be made for Special Education students, Limited English Proficient students, and students in Alternative High Schools. However, the issue of how this was to be accomplished was one on which it was harder to achieve consensus.

In order not to delay the issuance of the rest of Commission's work, these issues were deferred. Dr. Gordon set up three Task Forces to deal with these issues for the Commission's next report. This was very successful in defusing conflict and in bringing the group back to the overall concepts - on which they had already reached consensus.

The Commission had defined the tasks, reacted to and expanded upon the options produced by the working groups, and had clearly defined the underlying concepts and philosophy of the standards. Commission members then reacted to the first draft of the report at a full group meeting. The revised final draft was sent by mail for any reactions.

THE RESULTS

The Commission produced its report on time. There was one one dissenting opinion, from someone who had not attended any of the meetings. Otherwise, the Commission's report was the product of philosophical discussion and debate, definition of tasks to be performed by staff, fully-informed, data-oriented discussion, and outcomes based on the quantitative representation of the agreements which had been reached. The Chancellor and the Board of Education adopted all the recommendations, and these were implemented at the beginning of the next school year. In fact, the New York State Education Department (SED) allowed New York City to use this method of

evaluating schools instead of the State's own methodology. SED is presently looking at the possibility of using the New York City Minimum Standards Plan across the State.

The major recommendations of the Commission were as follows:

1. The report was entitled "Foundations for Academic Excellence" because it was just the beginning of the process. It was essential that by defining the "minimum," it not become the "maximum." Since the only legal authority the Chancellor had was to define "minimum" standards, these should become the foundation on which to build, not the ultimate outcomes.

2. Standards were universal. Standards were set for all elementary, intermediate/junior high schools, and high schools throughout the City.

3. Schools were required to reduce their deficits by fifty percent within three years. This plan evaluates schools based on their progress.

4. Where schools have met a particular standard, they must set a higher goal.

5. Future data improvements were prescribed (i.e., longitudinal, cohort analyses).

6. Issues for further study were defined: Special Education, Limited English Proficiency, Alternative High Schools.

The Commission also set standards. The characteristics of these minimum standards were as follows:

1. All standards exceeded the cut-offs used by the State Education Department.

2. There were both "minimum standards" and "progress standards."

3. Expected progress was reasonable yet challenging. The standards were credible.

4. Further standards were to be recommended in the next report based on a new testing program.

5. Standards were deferred in the criteria of Writing and Incidents.

THE IMPLICATIONS

Promulgating performance standards is an essential foundation for improving school performance and ensuring accountability to the public. In both cases, everyone is clear about what is expected within a specified timeframe. It is up to the local school and its community to assess its needs, evaluate its progress, and develop strategies for improvement.

This is why it was so important that interested groups across the City had participated in the development of the standards. These standards would become the basis for judging the progress of schools and of the school system as a whole. Performance standards can go a long way toward mitigating political judgment and replacing it with professional judgment based on assessing outcomes objectively. This can only happen if everyone involved has agreed to the standards.

Since these standards are so important, there are long range implications. We must develop better testing instruments. We must also develop standards which reflect other aspects of school performance, not just student outcomes. And, finally, the standards we now have must be reviewed periodically by a wide constituency to ensure their continued efficacy.